FACT SHEET

June 1996

STATE LEGISLATIVE

Speed

Driving Too Fast For Conditions

The United States Department of Transportation's, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) strongly believe that an effective speed management program must include enforcement, engineering and education to reduce speed-related fatalities and serious injuries.

All speed limits should be based on the actual threat of speed to safe travel, and should be perceived by the public as reasonable. Consideration must be given to a multi-disciplinary review of highway design, highway operations, differences at state or municipal borders, traffic safety and other appropriate factors. Traffic safety factors should include changes in traffic crashes, injuries and fatalities and the resulting estimated costs.

Few drivers view speeding as an immediate risk to their personal safety. However, speeding reduces drivers' reaction time and ability to steer safely around curves on highways or objects in the roadway. It extends the distance necessary to stop a vehicle, increases the distance a vehicle travels while a driver reacts, and reduces the effectiveness of the vehicle's safety features.

Speed enforcement must be complemented by focused public information and education campaigns. These efforts contribute to public support for speed enforcement and creating an understanding of the dangers of speeding. Public messages also should include an explanation of the societal and economic burdens of traffic crashes.

Key Facts - Speed - Driving Too Fast For Conditions

- Crash severity increases based on the speed at impact. Chances of death or serious injury double for every 10 MPH over 50 MPH a vehicle travels.
- Crash involvement rates are almost six times greater for vehicles traveling 10 MPH above or below the average speed.

In 1994,

- forty-four percent of speed-related fatalities occurred on non-Interstate roads posted at 55 MPH.
- sixty percent of all speed-related fatal crashes occurred at night (6 p.m. to 6 a.m.).
- sixty-six percent of speed-related crashes involved a single vehicle.
- rural roads accounted for 40 percent of all vehicle miles traveled, and over 60 percent of all speed-related fatal crashes.
- thirty-six percent of crashes on local roads were speed-related.
- speed-related crashes accounted for 24 percent of all fatal crashes on straight roadway sections, but constituted 48 percent of all fatal crashes occurring on curves.

Key Facts -Speed Limits

- After the 55 MPH National Maximum Speed Limit (NMSL) was established in 1974, highway fatalities dropped by almost 9,000, or 16 percent, while miles traveled decreased only 2 percent. This was the greatest single-year decrease in highway deaths since World War II.
- After the NMSL was amended in 1987 to allow 65 MPH speed limits on rural Interstates, fatalities on rural Interstates in those states that increased speed limits were 30 percent higher than expected. In these States, there was an estimated increase of 539 fatalities and $900 million in economic costs annually.
- Roadways, especially two-lane rural highways now posted at 55 MPH, may not be designed for higher speeds.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation

Key Facts - Youth

- Nearly 40 percent of male drivers ages 15 to 20 years old involved in fatal crashes were speeding.
- Thirty-two percent of all drivers aged 15-24 years involved in fatal crashes were speeding.

Key Facts - Speed And Other Unsafe Driving Practices

- In 1994, 30 percent of all fatal crashes were speed-related. Only 35 percent of passenger vehicle drivers involved in speed-related fatal crashes were using safety belts. Thirty-eight percent of speeding drivers were under the influence of alcohol.
- Alcohol involvement is prevalent in drivers involved in speed-related crashes. Of all drivers involved in speed-related fatal crashes, 50 percent were under the influence of alcohol. But, of all drivers involved in fatal crashes not speed-related, only 19 percent were under the influence of alcohol.
- In 1994, 11 percent of passenger vehicles drivers in fatal crashes were speeding while under the influence of alcohol.
- Eighty-seven percent of the drivers involved in fatal crashes, who were drinking and speeding, were males. Thirty-eight percent of these "deadly combination" drivers were between 15 and 24.
- Drivers involved in speed-related fatal crashes are more likely to have a history of traffic violations.
- Forty-four percent of all motorcyclists involved in fatal crashes were speeding. The percentage of speed involvement in fatal crashes for motorcyclists is more than twice that of drivers of passenger cars and light trucks.

Economic And Environmental Costs Of Speeding

- The costs to society of speed-related crashes are estimated at nearly $23 billion each year. This is an average of $44,660 per minute or $744 per second. The health care cost of speed-related crashes is $1.96 billion per year.
- Fuel efficiency, miles per gallon, decreases steadily above 45 MPH.
- Passenger cars and light trucks use approximately 50 percent more fuel traveling at 75 MPH than they do at 55 MPH.
- As speed increases, pollutants increase. From 55 MPH to 65 MPH, there is a 100 percent increase in carbon monoxide emissions, 50 percent increase in hydrocarbons, and 31 percent increase in nitrogen oxides.

Legislative History

- In 1974, Congress enacted a national maximum speed limit (NMSL) of 55 MPH. Originally enacted as a temporary fuel conservation measure, the 55 MPH speed limit was made permanent by Congress in 1975 because of its safety benefits.
- After the NMSL was established in 1974, highway fatalities dropped by almost 16 percent, a reduction of about 9,000 lives from the prior year. During this energy crisis, miles traveled decreased only two percent. Although we cannot attribute the entire decrease to the reduced speed limit, the NMSL was a major factor in the reduction, the largest since World War II. The NMSL only applied to highways on which about one-third of the total travel and one-half of all motor vehicle fatalities occurred.
- In 1978, Congress enacted legislation that required a specific measure of compliance based on the percentage of traffic exceeding the speed limit on all highways posted at 55 MPH. For those States that failed to comply, some Federal-aid funds would be withheld. However, no state ever lost funds. Congress enacted annual moratoriums on the penalty.
- In 1987, states were permitted to raise the limit to 65 MPH on rural Interstates; Federal sanctions related only to performance on 55 MPH roadways.
- In 1991, Congress changed the compliance formula to allow states more flexibility and to cover both 55 and 65 MPH roadways. For states that failed to comply, Federal-aid funds would be transferred to the states highway safety program.
- On December 8, 1995, the national maximum speed limit was repealed.

These reports and additional information are available through your State Office of Highway Safety, the NHTSA Regional Office serving your state, or from NHTSA Headquarters, Traffic Safety Programs, NTS-41, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.